

Message Text

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51

ACTION ARA-10

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SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 TRSE-00 EB-07 AGR-05 IO-10 COME-00

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3739

INFO AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE PANAMA 2509

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, PN

SUBJECT: TORRIJOS' CENTRAL AMERICAN TRIP

REFS: (A) STATE 096382 (B) GUATEMALA 2185 (C) SAN JOSE 1671

SUMMARY: TORRIJOS' SUDDEN AND SECRETIVE MISSIONS TO COSTA RICA, GUATEMALA AND EL SALVADOR APRIL 23-25 WERE, ACCORDING TO BTOH LOCAL PRESS AND EMBASSY SOURCE, A PERSONAL EFFORT IN SUPPORT OF PANAMA'S BANANA AND CANAL POLICIES. WHILE THE GENERAL SUCCEEDED IN BRINGING BACK VOTES FOR THE GOP'S UN SECURITY COUNCIL CANDIDACY, HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS ON THE BANANA FRONT ARE LESS CLEAR. ALTHOUGH THE BANANA QUESTION WAS HIS PRINCIPAL INTEREST, AND GUATEMALA APPARENTLY HIS PRIMARY TARGET, TORRIJOS APPEARS TO HAVE MADE LITTLE HEADWAY WITH PRESIDENT LAUGERUD. GUATEMALA DID NOT AGREE TO IMPOSE BANANA TAX (REF B) AND LAUGERUD'S REPORTED INTEREST IN UPEB MEMBERSHIP (REF C) DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE BEEN A FIRM

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COMMITMENT. END SUMMARY

1. IN AN UNEXPECTED AND UNANNOUNCED INITIATIVE, CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT OMAR TORRIJOS VISITED COSTA RICA, GUATEMALA AND EL SALVADOR APRIL 23-25 FOR SERIES OF IMPROMPTU CONSULTATIONS WITH HIS CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTERPARTS. THE PURPOSE OF TORRIJOS' SORTIE, WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE CAUGHT EVERYONE UNAWARES, HAS SINCE BEEN DESCRIBED BY THE PRESS AS A PERSONAL MISSION TO "REACTIVATE" CENTRAL AMERICAN UNITY ON THE BANANA FRONT IN THE WAKE OF THE HONDURAN SCANDAL AND TO STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR PANAMA'S CANAL POSITION IN GENERAL AND ITS UN SECURITY COUNCIL CANDIDACY IN PARTICULAR.

2. WHILE DETAILS OF TRIP REMAIN SKETCHY, ON THE DIPLOMATIC SIDE TORRIJOS IS REPORTED TO HAVE SECURED GUATEMALAN AND SALVADOREAN VOTES FOR PANAMA'S SECURITY COUNCIL AMBITIONS AS WELL AS ODUBER'S RECONFIRMATION OF THE COSTA RICAN VOTE. ONE REASON TORRIJOS GAVE FOR VISIT TO GUATEMALA WAS TO PERSONALLY THANK LAUGERUD FOR WITHDRAWING GUATEMALA'S CANDIDACY. WITH REGARD TO BANANAS, THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF TORRIJOS' MISSION ARE LESS CLEAR. THE GENERAL, ACCORDING TO LOCAL PRESS, REPORTEDLY GOT FROM LAUGERUD AN EXPRESSION OF INTEREST IN GUATEMALAN UPEB MEMBERSHIP AND FROM ODUBER AGREEMENT TO REMAIN IN "CONSTANT COMMUNICATION." AS STATED IN OFFICIAL GUATEMALAN STATEMENT (REF B) HOWEVER, TORRIJOS WAS UNSUCCESSFUL IN URGING LAUGERUD TO IMPOSE BANANA TAX AND, JUDGING FROM COMMENTS BY ONE MEMBER OF TORRIJOS' PARTY, DID NOT GET FIRM COMMITMENT ON UPEB MEMBERSHIP.

3. COMMENT: WHILE PRESS HAS PLACED TRIP FIRMLY IN CONTEXT OF ONGOING PANAMANIAN EFFORTS TO SUPPORT UPEB AND DEVELOP GOP'S UNSC CANDIDACY, TORRIJOS' SUDDEN AND SECRET DEPARTURE CAME AS COMPLETE SURPRISE. ACCORDING TO ONE RELIABLE SOURCE, NOT EVEN PRESIDENT LAKAS KNEW OF TRIP IN ADVANCE. WITH REGARD TO TORRIJOS' MOTIVES, WE BELIEVE THEY WERE BASICALLY AS PORTRAYED BY PRESS. A MEMBER OF THE GENERAL'S TRAVELLING PARTY HAS TOLD US THAT WHILE GUATEMALAN SUPPORT FOR PANAMA'S CANAL ASPIRATIONS WAS ONE OBJECTIVE, PRINCIPAL MISSION WAS TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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TALK BANANAS. TORRIJOS REPORTEDLY HOPED TO CONVINCE LAUGERUD TO JOIN "THE BANANA CLUB," WHICH IT IS STILL RELUCTANT TO DO, AS WELL AS TO GET A FEEL FOR WHETHER GUATEMALAN OFFICIALS HAD ENGAGED IN ANY HONDURAN STYLE HANKY-PANKY WITH BANANA COMPANIES.
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